Nixon's energy crisis—nothing to lose but his grip

By Harry Kelly
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON — When the lines of cars around service stations were growing longer, a congressman confronted an administration functionary and asked: "Is President Nixon too afraid of rocking the boat to do something drastic about the oil shortage?"

"Do you think," the sarcastic Nixon aide cracked in return, "we're worried about our image?"

"When you're down about 28 percent in the polls, you haven't much more to lose, so you wing it. It's when you're up around 70 percent you have to worry about keeping everybody happy."

Such a tinny silver lining must be cold comfort to Nixon. He has not only plunged from the penthouse to the bargain basement in popularity polls, he must watch his step as he faces impeachment in an election year Congress.

On the back of Watergate, the Nixon White House has lost much of its drive and rhetoric as well as its credibility. But is it also losing its grip? Is anyone minding the store?

When Nixon was flanked by John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, the White House was an authoritarian model. It no longer is.

Many federal departments now consider themselves to be more independent now, and some agencies feel they are drifting and that no one in the White House cares.

While Nixon is supported by some administration officials, he is the [illegible] of scorn in many others, some of whom [illegible] in their [illegible]

If you compare the President's position a year ago [illegible] was in the [illegible] build [illegible]

enforced by Haldeman and Ehrlichman would never have permitted the confusing public dispute between the White House and energy officials over how long the oil shortage may last.

It is evidence of Nixon's loss of authority that energy muscular enough to contradict both the President's aides, both the President's assertion that the back of the oil crisis would be broken this year, and budget chief Roy Ash's prediction that the crisis would last only months rather than years.

William Eberle, the President's top trade adviser, was so unafraid of Oval Office wrath that he signed a statement by a group of businessmen criticizing Nixon's handling of the Watergate scandal.

Is the nation wallowing like a rudderless ship, with truck drivers tying up commerce with a violent strike, with the oil shortage forcing industries to cut back and lay off workers, with an automobile-oriented society lining up to pay $3 for six gallons of gasoline, with service stations threatening to strike and the economy facing inflation combined with recession.

Or will Nixon retreat into a hermit presidency only to emerge with his yellow-lined tablet and a startling policy announcement?

"If the economy goes bad with prices going up and unemployment rising, Republicans in the House really find it difficult to give Nixon a vote on impeachment," said a Republican. "When things go bad people heavily blame the guy in charge."

In the polarization of Washington, there are two [illegible] of Richard Nixon.

One has him almost secluded, shorn of his closest advisers, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and John Mitchell, plotting tricky strategems with his lawyers for resisting Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski and impeachment, while making only superficial gestures for the benefit of TV cameras at governing.

The other view shows Nixon governing without Lyndon Johnson's flimflam, striving to bring about infer-

[illegible] Nixon's [illegible] oil crisis, perhaps [illegible] United States but for [illegible] world [illegible] attacks?

One Capitol Hill congressman who saw Nixon recently expressed the contradiction of a man who seems confident but also appears to be [illegible] running the show.

"He looked fine. He sounded confident. He was articulate. I can't [illegible] stand it. I think he's very shaky."

The Richard Nixon of his public glimpses in his State of the Union and budget messages was not the austere knight of a year ago challenging Congress and hacking at New Deal, Fair Deal, and Great Society programs.

Instead he appeared eager to avoid confrontation, willing to compromise, and willing to break his own budget to stop a recession.

In the view of one White House official, little has changed.

"Nothing has changed because of the staff structure and the nature of man. He prefers to work from power and he doesn't like large meetings. He gets the action papers, goes to Camp David, calls some people, and there's the decision. I don't think much has changed."

There had been hopes, particularly among Republicans on Capitol Hill, that once Ehrlichman and Haldeman left the White House, the door of the Oval Office would be more open.

But a former Cabinet aide thinks the opposite has occurred, that Nixon had become more rather than less isolated.

He recalled that in days leading up to the "Saturday Night Massacre" Nixon did not see his attorney general, Elliot Richardson, until 4 p.m. Saturday, even though major negotiations had been underway all week and Richardson had threatened to resign twice. All the negotiations were conducted through an intermediary, Haig. That is the reason, many believe, for the major miscalculation.

Nixon has maintained an arm's-distance approach in dealing with the energy shortage. His direct involvement — as far as public visibility is concerned — has been meager.

Nixon has left center stage to Simon — for the energy chief to take the blame or more likely the [illegible] bolts.